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RANCHING INFORMATION ON THE WEB

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Introduction

Each day, we are flooded with new information about different products, management practices or production procedures. To keep from missing out on the opportunities while keeping our sanity, we must become better users of information.

In the future, the use and transfer of this information will involve the use of Internet and the World Wide Web. By providing an around-the-clock link to the outside world for the user and a vast sea of information, the producer can access valuable information from any where in the world, whether they are located in northern Montana, southern Texas, or in the mountains of Colorado or even a foreign country.

With increasing emphasis on operational efficiency, many of our world's farm and ranches will take advantage of this tool. Each day an increasing number of operations are using their computer to make purchases, to check the cattle markets, and to obtain information through the Web. In many cases, this tool might provide the information necessary to remain competitive in an ever-changing market place.

The following information was designed to inform the producer of why the use of Web is important, how to get hooked up to Web, some ideas about how to use the Web efficiently, and a brief look of what is available on the Web.

Why is the Use of the Web Important?

Before we talk about why the Web is important, I think it is important that we understand what the World Wide Web is and how it relates to the Internet. The Web is a group of pages of information connected to each other around the world. Each of these pages contains links that connects to another Web page, and each new Web page can take you to other places. The Internet's network is at the core of the Web.

Now that we know what the Web is why is it important. It seems time is the limiting factor for most operations, whether it be to explore new ideas and try new production practices or maybe to just to spend more time with your family. Time is such a precious resource, so it is important that we use it efficiently and wisely. The use of the Web provides us with many opportunities to gather information or place orders from the comfort of our home or office at a time convenient for us. It also allows us to accomplish this task in far less time than what it would have taken us in the past.

The Web provides us with a visual presentation of photographs, magazines, and many other images which allow us to look at items without actually going to where it is located. It

provides us with a vast database of educational & reference materials which can provide valuable input for the decision making process of operation.

How to Get Hooked Up to Web

To get hooked up (linked) to the Web, the user needs these four items.

First, you will need a computer. Although, most computers will work, it would probably be wise to obtain a computer capable of running Window 95 or 98.

Secondly, you will need a modem to hook your computer to a phone line. The speed at which your modem operates is referred to "in bits per second" or "K". So what you should look for is a modem with a least 56K.

The third item, you will need to make arrangements for Internet Service Provider, or ISP. Most of the time, especially in the rural areas you will be able to make a better deal from a local ISP. When you are shopping around for an ISP, make sure to ask about the price (especially if you plan to use the Web often), what kind of support staff is available, response time at peak load and the modem speed which their equipment will support. Many of the rural telephone companies are beginning to provide this service for their customers. Most providers will charge about \$20 a month and give either unlimited hours or a large monthly allotment. To find out about local service providers, the best way is to ask someone in your area who already has access and see whether they like it or not. Or you could check the yellow pages and business pages of your local newspaper.

The fourth item is the software for your computer. In most cases, the commercial providers will give program disks that work with their systems.

These items should give you the equipment you need to get started on the Internet and the Web. Once you are linked the fun begins, but to make good use of your time you must learn how to use the Web.

How to Use the Web Efficiently

Once you have made connection to the Web, you will need a browser to check it out. The most popular ones are Internet Explorer and Netscape. This is the software that retrieves the Web pages and displays them on your page. You probably already have one installed on your computer or could have received one from your Internet Service Provider (ISP).

After you have started your browser, you will need to select an index or directory. Most of the indexes and directories available are categorized and described as search engines. Some of the search engines available include Yahoo, Infoseek, AltaVista, Lycos, and several others. The search engines use either an index or directory approach to its search. The index approach looks for topic areas that match your keywords, which could provide you with a list of links too big to handle. The directory approach begins with a general topic and allows you to get more and more specific.

Each of the search engines has positive characteristics, so my advice would be for you to try several of them and see which one fits you.

One of the best characteristics of your browser is its ability to let you mark a spot and then you can add it to a list of sites you might wish to visit again. These are called bookmarks or favorites. The best way to view these "marked sites" is like reference list that can be immediately accessed without having to do any searches.

What is Available on the Web?

A vast sea of information and educational materials are available to you on the Web. Extension publications are available to you through the Web sites of most of the land grant universities. Most of the fact sheets and research data as well as proceedings and schedule of events are available for reading or printing, complete with photographs and graphics.

Most of our government entities have Web sites (i.e., IRS, USDA, and NRCS) that can be accessed for information as well as forms and publications.

For the beef producers, the National Cattlemen's Beef Associations can access through their Web site. Also, the most of the major breeds have Web sites. Through many of these sites, you can also contact employees of those organizations by using their listed e-mail addresses.

Another important aspect of the Web for the producer is access to the commodity markets. The USDA provides market information through their Agricultural Marketing Service. Also, you can access the Chicago Mercantile Exchange and the Chicago Board of Trade through their Web sites. You can also subscribe to many other market-reporting services.

The Web sites designed to report the weather could also be reasons for using the Internet. There are several sites that will provide forecast, charts and satellite photographs.

In addition to those Web sites, many companies have their own Web sites. Available through these sites are company and product information as well as research data. Also, these sites are being used more and more every day to place orders for product.

There are thousands of Web sites available to the user of the Internet. The challenge is to find the ones, which are important to you and your family and to use them efficiently.

I have created a list of my personal favorites, if you desire to look at them to see if they might be valuable to you, please e-mail me at jsswigert@noble.org. I will send them to you with instructions in a format that will allow to look at them, and then you will be able to bookmark those which are important.